

An Open Letter to Preserve Instruction at ETSU

Dear Dr. Noland and Dr. Bishop,

The Mission and Values statement of East Tennessee State University affirms that "Education is the university's highest priority." During recent budget discussions, ETSU's senior leadership endorsed drastic reductions to instructional funding as one of the initial steps to address a potential budget shortfall. Part-time (adjunct) faculty face the prospect of mass layoffs. Yet the highest-paid university employees, including upper administration, currently face no cuts. The proposed cuts to instruction will be harmful for the ETSU community and for the institution's long-term financial health.

We, the undersigned employees, students, alumni, and community members, call on ETSU decision-makers to honor its mission by doing the following:

1. Prioritize education by preserving instructional budgets at 2019-2020 funding levels and committing to no layoffs for adjunct faculty.

Address the adjunct crisis at ETSU constructively, rather than making "draconian" cuts to adjuncts and placing the burden on full-time faculty (1).

2. Practice equity and financial responsibility by instituting temporary salary reductions for the highest paid employees first, before any other employees face cuts.

Save the jobs of the lowest-paid, mission-critical employees by distributing gradually increasing tiered cuts among the highest paid employees and cutting retention, incentive, and performance bonuses for upper administration and highly-paid athletic coaches (2). Preserving the jobs of part-time and full-time faculty and facilities and support staff will enhance the experience of students and support retention.

3. Ensure transparency in proposed strategies to meet budget shortfalls by providing a clear public accounting of the state of ETSU's reserve funds, a database of ETSU salaries, and an accounting of perks enjoyed by the highest-paid ETSU employees paid for through ETSU finances.

4. Convene the promised committee to re-evaluate the base budgets established by the decentralized budget model.

Background:

During the month of June, senior leadership at ETSU required all campus units to address an expected 12-15% cut in state appropriations. The state ultimately did not reduce funding for higher education, but ETSU's budgetary outlook, diminished reserves, and spending priorities

remain unclear and difficult to follow. Given the continuing uncertainty of the pandemic, everyone has an interest in minimizing the damage of future budgetary reductions.

ETSU senior leadership adopted a decentralized budget model in 2017. The model requires academic departments to “earn their keep” and intensifies long-term financial pressures on academic departments to replace full-time tenure-track teaching positions with part-time teaching. Under this budgetary model, administrative salaries and positions have continued to grow, while many academic departments have lost faculty lines, which puts programs at risk. ETSU mirrors a national trend of “massively disproportionate growth in the number of administrative employees, coupled with the continuing shift to an increasingly precarious corps of mostly temporary, underpaid, and insufficiently supported instructors, [which] represents a real threat to the quality of our academic programs” (3).

Part-time, adjunct instructors subsidize ETSU by teaching roughly 40% of classes each fall at low pay and no benefits (4). During the most recent period of budget cut discussions, academic departments were told that they would lose half or all of their part-time instructor funding. Funding for tutoring and supplemental instruction were also slated to be cut. Rather than follow the lead of other institutions and announce tiered reductions in pay for the highest-paid workers who are most able to weather economic hardship, it was the lowest-paid workers who were singled out as expendable. Despite the supposedly decentralized model, departments must now justify each adjunct hire to their Dean and the Interim Provost during the COVID-19 crisis.

Reducing instructional spending harms everyone: part-time (adjunct) instructors, full-time lecturers, tenured and tenure-track faculty, and, most important of all, students. Reductions in the highest-paid positions at ETSU would spare this harm.

Harm to part-time (adjunct) instructors: In mid-June, adjunct instructors learned that their teaching assignments, and thus their pay, would be cut in half or lost entirely in 2020-2021. Many adjuncts, some with years of service at ETSU, are facing job loss. Some are now looking for new jobs in a recession. Adjuncts at ETSU already earn below-poverty wages and their work is precarious.

Harm to full-time instructors: Lecturers and tenured/tenure-track faculty have been told that their teaching loads and class sizes will be increased this fall without extra compensation. Department chairs and faculty are struggling to find ways to combine course sections, and chairs have been told to submit staffing plans proving that their adjunct budgets were cut. Heavier teaching loads for tenure-track and tenured faculty will mean diminished research productivity and reduced opportunities to mentor and engage students in research.

Harm to students: The proposed changes in instruction would directly harm the quality of students' education. Student tuition covers the greatest portion of ETSU's revenue, yet students have not been informed about the proposed budget cuts that would affect their courses, their instructors, their class sizes, their tutors, and educational experience. Students did not know that

their chances to engage in research might be limited because their professors were teaching heavier course loads.

Dr. Noland and Dr. Bishop, you have an obligation to uphold the educational mission of the university. We ask you to preserve instructional funding in order to promote student enrollment and retention at ETSU.

[Endnotes]

1. Keeling, Jeff. "Pandemic puzzle: ETSU piecing together budget amid major uncertainty." (<https://www.wjhl.com/news/pandemic-puzzle-etsu-piecing-together-budget-amid-major-uncertainty/>)
2. As of March 2020, an open records request showed that 311 ETSU employees earned \$100,000 or more; 115 employees earn \$150,000 or more; 49 employees earn \$200,000 or more; and 15 earn \$300,000 per year or more, excluding performance or retention bonuses. Several other higher education institutions have implemented temporary reductions for their highest-paid employees: University of Kentucky, University of Louisville, Wayne State University, Marshall University, and University of South Carolina. See also "Pay cuts for university presidents, coaches," Inside Higher Ed, April 6, 2020 (<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/04/06/pay-cuts-university-presidents-coaches>).
3. American Association of University Professors. 2014. "Losing focus: The annual report on the economic status of the profession, 2013-14" (<https://www.aaup.org/reports-publications/2013-14salarysurvey>).
4. United Campus Workers. 2020. "Exploitation at ETSU: How Adjunctification of Instruction Harms Faculty and Students at East Tennessee State University" (<https://www.unitedcampusworkers.org/ETSUExploitation>).